

# Spirituality in Mental Health

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# About Me

- Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner at Lindner Center of HOPE in Mason, Ohio
- Board-certified in internal/family medicine, psychiatry/mental health and addictions.
- Attended USC for undergrad; UC for master's; ECU for post-master's
- PhD in Mind-Body Medicine from Saybrook University
- Pastor's kid

# Objectives

1. Discuss and understand the definition of Mental Wellness
2. Discuss and understand the difference between Spirituality and Religion
3. Discuss and understand the difference between Healing and Curing
4. Discuss the role that Spirituality plays in combating mental health issues

# Considerations

- Different stages of faith or different faith beliefs entirely
- Different levels of mental wellness / coping skills
- Different takeaways – ANY takeaway is a win
- I'm here to present the data, not to convert anyone!

# Ethical considerations

- I have to be mindful of ethical considerations surrounding pushing a certain religious ideology onto a patient; however I believe there is a way to incorporate a spiritual aspect into treatment, while respecting the patient's autonomy to choose what that might look like for them.
- Also, it's important to be cautious when cognitive distortions of a patient involve S/R, such as believing that their illness is a punishment from God. Distorted religious practices are common in schizophrenia and OCD as well.

# Mental Health 101



# What is Mental Wellness?

- Mental wellness is not merely the absence of disorders/disease but has been defined by the World Health Organization as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community."

# What is Mental Wellness?

- Absence of mental illness and presence of a well-adjusted personality that contributes effectively to the life of the community (Verghese, 2008).
- Ability to take responsibility for one's own actions, flexibility, high frustration tolerance, acceptance of uncertainty, involvement in activities of social interest, courage to take risks, serenity to accept the things which we cannot change, courage to change the things which we can change, the wisdom to know the difference between the above, acceptance of handicaps, tempered self-control, harmonious relationships to self, others, including Nature and God (Verghese, 2008).

# What is depression?

- Feelings of sadness, tearfulness, emptiness or hopelessness
- Angry outbursts, irritability or frustration, even over small matters
- Loss of interest or pleasure in most or all normal activities
- Sleep disturbances
- Tiredness and lack of energy, so even small tasks take extra effort
- Appetite changes
- Slowed thinking, speaking or body movements
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt, fixating on past failures or self-blame
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions and remembering things
- Frequent or recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts or suicide
- Unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches
- ([mayoclinic.org](http://mayoclinic.org))

# What is Anxiety?

- Anxiety is an emotion and emotions are a UNIVERSAL human experience.
- Emotions drive our BEHAVIOR, may or may not regret.
- Emotions are data. Emotions are COMMUNICATORS
- Dictionary definition of emotion: “Instinctive or intuitive feeling as distinguished from reasoning or knowledge.” Emotions can be illogical.
- Emotions get a SEAT at the metaphorical table, but they don’t get to sit at the HEAD of the table.

# Why are we talking about this?

- Mental illnesses are among the most common health conditions in the United States.
- More than 50% will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime.
- 1 in 5 Americans will experience a mental illness in a given year.
- The CDC is now reporting suicide has overtaken accidental deaths as the leading cause of death amongst young adults.
- <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm>  
<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/adolescent-health.htm>

# Why are we talking about this?

A sense of community is the #1 tool of prevention for suicide and depression.

Is this not where faith-based communities can fill in the gap?

# Definition of Spirituality

“Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning and purpose to our lives.”

~ Brene Brown

# Difference between Spirituality and Religion?

- Religion is institutionalized spirituality.
- “I believe in God. How do I worship Him?”
- The institutions of religion are supposed to help us to practice spirituality in our lives.
  
- (NIH, 2008)

# Religion in US

- 78% of Americans identified religion as important in their lives, and 87% believe in God (Greenblatt & Brogan, 2015).
- Of the 228 million Americans who responded to the 2008 US Census:
  - 173 million identify as Christian (Catholicism being the largest denomination at 57 million).
  - 2nd largest - Jewish = 2.6 million
- <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2011/compendia/statab/131ed/population.html>

# Remember

- “It is possible that religions can lose their spirituality when they become institutions of oppression instead of agents of goodwill, peace and harmony. They can become divisive instead of unifying.... We must remember that the institutions of religion are supposed to help us to practice spirituality in our lives.”
- -Abraham Verghese
- Acknowledge spiritually traumatic experiences. Remember the original intent.

# Important Answers

- Many of my patients experience depression surrounding some pretty heady questions with spiritual/religious implications, such as:
- What is my purpose in life?
- What was I created for?
- What happens after I die?
- How could this happen to me?
- Why am I hurting?
- Why can't I be healed? Why would God allow me to suffer?

# Benefits of Spirituality / Faith Community

- Protecting people from social isolation
- Providing and strengthening family and social networks
- Providing individuals with a sense of belonging and self-esteem
- Offering spiritual support in times of adversity.

# Benefits of Spirituality / Faith Community

Thomas Ashby Wills, Professor of Epidemiology and population health at Albert Einstein College of Medicine developed a scale that determines how important is religion to people. This was administered to 1182 children in New York. It was found that religiosity kept children from smoking, drinking and drug abuse by buffering the impact of life stresses.

Gene H. Brody, a research professor of child and family development at the University of Georgia, Athens, found that parents who were more involved in church activities were more likely to have harmonious marital relationships and better parenting skills. That in turn enhanced children's competence, self-regulation, psychosocial adjustment and school performance.

doi: [10.4103/0019-5545.44742](https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.44742)

# Benefits of Spirituality / Faith Community

Miller et al. made a 10-year follow up study on depressed mothers and their offsprings and reported that maternal religiosity and mother-child concordance in religiosity were protective against depression in the offspring. They also reported that low level of religiosity was associated with substance abuse in the offsprings.

J. Scott Tonigan, a research professor of psychiatry at the University of New Mexico, followed up 226 patients of alcohol dependence and reported that spirituality predicts behavior such as honesty and responsibility which in turn promoted alcohol abstinence.

A study on the factors in the course and outcome of schizophrenia was conducted in the Department of psychiatry, Christian Medical College, Vellore. It was a collaborative study among three centers—Vellore, Madras and Lucknow. A two-year and five-year follow up showed that those patients who spent more time in religious activities tended to have a better prognosis.

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# The Source

I also acknowledge that a spiritual/religious belief can be for a person a source of:

- guilt
- failure
- responsibility
- stigma
- isolation
- shame
- abuse

Sexual abuse by religious workers, traumatic events which turned the patient away from religious beliefs and activities, unanswered prayers, etc. are examples

# Stress and Anxiety can have Spiritual Symptoms

- a loss of meaning in life
- obsessional religious thoughts and actions
- feelings of alienation and indifference
- loss of previous spiritual belief
- no sense of the future
- fear of death
- fear of the consequences of 'sins' or religiously-defined 'bad' behaviour and/or
- an inability to focus on 'God' or to meditate
  - <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/impact-spirituality.pdf>

# What we know:

Becoming involved in a faith community, and engaging in spiritual practices associated with that community increase a sense of belonging and self-worth in a person, which leads to overall improved mental health.

# Putting into Practice

- Prayer (spontaneous or prepared)
- Attending regular faith-filled gatherings
- Gratitude
- Mindfulness, Meditation, and Affirmations
- Volunteerism and Service
- Reframing

# Prayer

Researchers from Baylor University found that people who pray to a loving and protective God are less likely to experience anxiety-related disorders — worry, fear, self-consciousness, social anxiety and obsessive compulsive behavior — compared to people who pray but don't really expect to receive any comfort or protection from God.

Another recent study by Columbia University found that participating in regular prayer actually thickens parts of the brain's cortex, and this could be the reason those activities tend to guard against depression — especially in those at risk for the disease.

[PsychCentral.com](https://www.psychcentral.com)

# Attending regular faith-filled gatherings

“Service attendance is thought to protect against depression by providing social support from others, connection through shared traditions and values, and meaning through rituals.” (Greenblatt and Brogan, 2015).

BUT the risk of depression increases with attendance for those who do not feel accepted, or perceive a conflict in the faith community.

# Gratitude and Forgiveness

Both of these are associated with lower levels of depression.

The practice of gratitude brings us happiness, reduces anxiety, strengthens the immune system, helps us sleep better, makes us more resilient, and strengthens relationships.

Keep a gratitude journal.

<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/gratitude/definition#why-practice-gratitude>

# Mindfulness, Meditation, and Affirmations

While M/M/A do NOT have to include spiritual flavor, they often do and when a patient combines M/M/A practices with spiritual beliefs, there is a synergistic effect.

- Broadly described as cultivation of awareness, relaxation, focused attention and stillness.
- Pioneered by Jon Kabat-Zinn.
- Often, a person will choose a mantra with spiritual overtones.

# Mindfulness, Meditation, and Affirmations

Since 2009, roughly 10 studies have examined the efficacy of mindfulness practices with patients who were unresponsive to antidepressant therapy. Three-quarters of these studies showed statistically significant reduction in Ham-D scores (Jain, 2015)

Mindfulness techniques have been shown to increase parasympathetic tone, which via the vagus nerve can regulate inflammation (Ditto, 2006)

Release of serotonin, GABA, dopamine and melatonin during meditation (Newberg, 2010).

# Mindfulness, Meditation, and Affirmations

Further, meditation is associated with increased concentration of gray matter in areas of the brainstem - this structural change suggests that people continue to experience the neurochemical benefits of meditation even when not in a meditative state (Greenblatt and Brogan, 2015).

Mindfulness has been suggested to have the ability to modulate the immune system itself as demonstrated in HIV-infected adults who show increase in circulation of CD4+ T lymphocyte counts (Cresswell, 2009).

# Volunteerism and Service

Many faith communities promote involvement in service-oriented projects.

- Reduces stress
- Shifts our perspective
- Redirects our focus
- Provides sense of accomplishment
- Combats feeling of isolation
- Increases self-confidence and self-worth
- Gives a sense of purpose and meaning

<https://www.ableto.com/resources/mental-health-benefits-of-volunteering/>

# Reframing: Healing v. Curing

Curing is the removal of symptoms, as if they did not exist in the first place. (i.e. Strep Throat)

Healing is not necessarily the absence of symptoms, but restoration of the whole person (mind/body/spirit), and peace/acceptance of an outcome.

GOAL is not eradication but rather MANAGEABILITY

A person can say “It is well with my soul” even when all is not well in their life or in their body.

# Reframing

Christianity teaches that suffering is to be expected in life and the Bible pays a great deal of attention to its existence (i.e. book of Job).

Suffering enables a believer to identify with the suffering of Christ and it produces perseverance, character and, ultimately, hope.

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/impact-spirituality.pdf>

# The ugly truth.

A life without anxiety is not realistic.

The goal is not eradication, the goal is management.

The scary things in life, sometimes we have to do them afraid.

Radically accept that anxiety might be a part of your life forever (much like Paul's 'thorn in the flesh')

# Spiritually Augmented Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

New psychotherapeutic method called Spiritually Augmented Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (SACBT). This is a treatment technique, incorporating spiritual values to Cognitive behavior therapy, which was developed and promoted at the University of Sydney.

Four key areas are emphasized—acceptance, hope, achieving meaning and purpose and forgiveness. The patient is guided through five phases to achieve meaning and purpose.

1. This starts with examining the inevitables of life such as birth and death.
2. After desensitizing the patient to mortality, the patient is moved to the next phase of letting go of fear and turmoil in life.
3. The next phase examines the patient's lifestyle aspects that avoid confronting mortality and perpetuate fear and turmoil.
4. The next phase involves a focus on seeking divine purpose, after examining and accepting one's journey in life.
5. Finally, meaning is sought by seeking meaning for each day. This is achieved by identifying meaningful and realistic factors within whatever limitations life and illness bring.

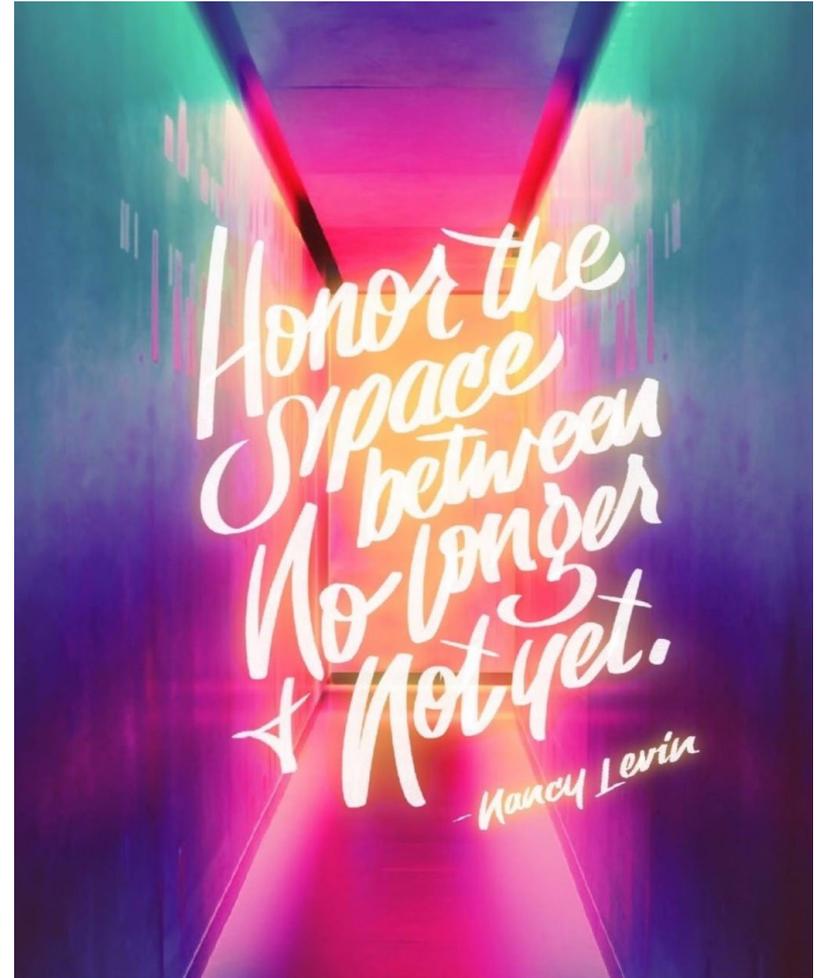
(D'Souza, 2004).

# The ugly truth.

Anxiety is a chronic struggle.

Recovery takes hard work, practice, and training.

Give yourself some grace in the process.



# The Chaos of COVID

The changing workplace:  
Working from home, isolation,  
productivity, mistrust, new  
work systems,  
tremendous uncertainty,  
masks/PPE, conspiracy  
theories, vaccine mandates,  
inadequate staffing, confusing/  
evolving policies, etc.

Still my best pandemic  
therapeutic thoughts:

This feels hard  
because it is hard. 🙌

@AUNDIKOLBER

# It's our FFT (freaking first time).

“It's hard to be new at things – from small things to global pandemics. When we have no relevant experience or expertise, the vulnerability, uncertainty, and fear of these firsts can be overwhelming. Yet, showing up and pushing ourselves past the awkward, learner stage is how we get braver.” ~Brene Brown, PhD

- Recognize that we are all just doing the best that we can.
- Give each other the benefit of the doubt if at all possible. Assume positive intent.
- Err on the side of grace and curiosity rather than criticism.

# Questions?



# Dear Anxiety, Let's Break Up: 40 Devotions to Conquer Worry and Fear

